



Losada, José Manuel y Lipscomb, Antonella (eds.), *Myth and Emotions*. Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 363 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5275-0011-2.

Over the last two decades, cultural and social studies have undergone what critic Patricia Clough very eloquently defined as «the affective turn»¹, that is to say, a turn of the critical debate towards feelings, emotions and impulses that transcends the traditional boundaries of biological and psychological studies to argue that, in fact, as Greenwald Smith writes, «affects are socially transmissible» and therefore should be socially considered. The fundamental claim of this affective turn suggests that feelings and emotions «have a social, historical, and therefore shared dimension» insofar as they are «culturally instigated», which determines that the social and even political study of emotions becomes extremely relevant for the study of cultural productions². In fact, as Clough argued in her seminal work, the turn to affect in fact registers «a change in the cofunctioning of the political, economic, and cultural», for affect is in this regard not understood as pre-social, but refers instead «to bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body's capacity to act, to *engage*, and to *connect*» (my italics)³. Yet, as authors such as Duncan have recognized, the term 'emotion' is far less critically prestigious than 'affect' and thus has been less considered than the latter, which has been quite prominent in the critical discourse since the Deleuze-and-Spinoza inspired work by Brian Massumi (1995) that served to define affect as «a-signifying», «not ownable or recognizable», and «irreducibly bodily and autonomic»⁴. The term 'emotions' –crucial for the exhaustive myth-critical study under review– seems however more specific, more signifying, more ownable and recognizable, to borrow (and twist, slightly) Massumi's words; but, as Sara Ahmed's fundamental *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004) demonstrated at the dawn of this affective turn, emotions are indeed an extremely eloquent critical prism to look at culture and society and, perhaps, as Zerilli writes, to «explore the nonrational bases of political attachments that impede progressive social transformation»⁵.

This is, quite possibly, one of the main reasons that explain the critical success of affect theory: how it explicitly takes up social, political and cultural topics and regards them from an unexplored perspective that deals, precisely, with how the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped, to paraphrase Ahmed (p. 10). Indeed, the current critical debate

¹ P. T. Clough and J. Halley (eds.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, London, 2007.

² R. Greenwald Smith, "Postmodernism and the Affective Turn", *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3/4 (2011): 423-446, 423.

³ Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn*, 1-2.

⁴ Cit. in P. Duncan, "Once More, with Frederic Jameson", *Cultural Critique* 97 (2017): 1-23, 2.

⁵ L. M. G. Zerilli, "The Turn to Affect and the Problem of Judgement", *New Literary History* 46.2 (2015): 261-268, 261.

around emotions has focused on how they should be considered as social or cultural practices (Ahmed, p. 9), on how they serve to attach certain collectives to the conditions of their subordination and thus sustain and reinforce relations of power (p. 12), and on how they can constitute a form of world building (p. 12). This seems particularly interesting for the consideration of emotions in the study of myth making and re-making, inasmuch as myths themselves –and especially the aesthetic and literary reshaping of myths– is itself a cultural practice that either reinforces or thwarts social structures and relationships of power, particularly through world building. Perhaps mythologist Eleazar Meletinsky defined it best when he argued that the cognitive core of myth is geared «to harmonizing the universe to such an extent that it does not admit of the slightest degree of chaos and disorder»; but of course, this transformation –or world-building– of chaos into harmony becomes guarantor of a specific social order, since, as Meletinsky writes, «[the] primitive man defines harmony in such a way that it includes all the axiological and ethical aspects of life»⁶. The cultural, social and political analysis of emotions would determine that, in fact, the axiological and ethical components of a world order built through myth are accompanied by a set of emotional reactions and relations. This is precisely the critical focus of the volume *Myth and Emotions*: to critically examine the emotions of myth in a way that recognizes the emotional dimension of mythical world order as a way to explore the aesthetics, culture and politics of emotions in contemporary society.

The volume, which compiles a selection of twenty-six articles expertly reviewed and edited, issues from the «IV International Conference on Mythcriticism» (under the title «Myth and Emotions») that was held at Complutense University of Madrid in October 2016. As such, the volume represents the fourth instalment in a series of books devoted to the study of the relevance and cultural signification of myths in the contemporary world, namely: *Myth and Subversion in the Contemporary Novel* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), *Mito e Interdisciplinarietà. Los mitos antiguos, medievales y modernos en la literatura y las artes contemporáneas* (Levante Editori, 2013), *Myths in Crisis: The Crisis of Myth* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), and the present volume *Myths and Emotions* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017). As embedded within this series, and as a product of the innovative and interdisciplinary research on myth that editor José Manuel Losada and his research group ACIS have been encouraging from Complutense University in recent years, the volume *Myth and Emotions* constitutes a truly enlightening example of Losada's efforts to develop new and holistic trends in the criticism of myths that give accurate account of the specific circumstances that surround and determine the representations and reinterpretations of myth in the modern and post-modern world. As argued in the first part of this review, the consideration of the emotional dimension of myth, that is to say, the critical exploration of mythical-emotional phenomena in contemporary culture, serves to locate this study specifically –and contemporary European research on myth as led by Losada and his colleagues– in the epicentre of the critical debate around affect, emotion, and the social sciences.

An overview of the excellent essays contained in the volume certainly certifies this claim, as they all illustrate, from a wide array of perspectives, that, as Losada and Lipscomb argue in the «Preface», emotion really «intersects with the cultural practice of myths» for, indeed, emotion «largely shapes our response to the world. It

⁶ E. M. Meletinsky, *The Poetics of Myth*, London/New York, 1998, 156.

conditions our motivations, gives us energy and orders our private and social behaviour» (pp. xiii). As claimed, such power of emotions to order (or shape) the 'I' and the 'we' –to connect the words of the editors with the terminology of Ahmed (in her *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 10)– actually parallels the ordering foundations of mythology, in a way that makes the cultural analysis of emotions inextricable from a conscientious critical probing into the shapes and functions of myth in our present and contemporary history. Such is indeed the task of *Myth and Emotions*, and that critical endeavour justifies the very intuitive structure of a volume divided first in two parts («Theory» and «Practice») and then, in three separate categories that organize the «Practice» section: «Positivity», «Traumatic-vulnerable Negativity», and «Violent Negativity». In the «Preface» the editors justify this structure by appealing to our varied emotional interpretation of events and situations, and I find this position to be insightful for a proper understanding of the study as a whole. For indeed, as Ahmed writes, «whether something feels good or bad already involves a process of reading, in the very attribution of significance» (p. 6), and that is precisely what *Myth and Emotions* attempts and achieves with great mastery: a process of reading, of exploring, of interpreting, of attributing significance to many and quite diverse reinterpretations of myth in contemporary culture through the critical prism of their emotional dimension.

The volume collects twenty-six essays written by a set of worldwide experts coming from ten different countries and exploring the literary and artistic work of authors of over a dozen nationalities. The result, as intended by the editors, is a truly multilingual –essays are written in French, Spanish and English– and multicultural study that truly captures the state of affairs of cutting-edge myth-criticism globally, but that is specifically centred on Europe as a social and geographical node for international cooperative research. In the opening chapter, editor Losada, after identifying the focal points that connect myth, emotion and affect, argues that «culture myth-criticism has to include the description and analysis of the paths where the rhetoric of individual and social psychology intersects with the cultural practice of myths» (p. 24). This is definitely the undertaking of a volume that after five initial chapters dealing exhaustively with the theoretical bases that connect myth and emotions –in this regard, Aladro Vico's essay about the metacognitive properties of myth seems particularly illuminating in how it explores the capacity of the language of myth to order and reconcile emotional turmoil– offers twenty-one more articles that rigorously analyse varied cultural fabrications of myth, looking critically at how those cultural constructions liberate, exploit, cleanse or construct affects as indissoluble constituents of culture and society.

Due to the evident limits of this review, a one-by-one assessment of all twenty-six essays (even though clearly deserved and much desirable) is regrettably not possible. Yet, I do not wish to complete this review without highlighting two currents of critical assessment that traverse the entirety of the volume and which really illustrate, in my opinion, the critical relevance of this study within both fields of myth-criticism and affect theory. There are several nodal points that articulate the confluence of topics and phenomena examined in the book, as for example the generic study of tragedy vs. parody (in chapters six and thirteen), the connections between childhood, memory, nostalgia and trauma (in chapters eleven and twelve), the concern with the specific mythical circumstances of modernity and postmodernity (in chapters seventeen and twenty-four), and others just as significant. However, there are two threads

that truly connect these and other critical nodes with the theoretical framework of the study and which very clearly illustrate the undeniable relevance of affects for a proper analysis of the aesthetic representations of myth.

The first of these threads is the one that explores the connections between science, science-fiction and mythology, which also allows for a very interesting examination of contemporary popular culture – a clear aesthetic manifestation of postmodernity that captures, explores and releases the emotional struggles of today's society. This is a thread that connects Fernández Urtasun's theoretically-based essay about the tensions between science and myth –which she places specifically on the emotional component that shapes myth but is absent from science– with other essays along the study which, like Paterakis's exploration of the myth of the labyrinth in Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, or Contreras Espuny's analysis of the story of Prometheus remade in the television series *Black Mirror*, focus on the purging of emotions and also the politics of emotions in science fiction and popular culture in a way that is cognate with, for example, Pérez Amezcua's examination of the series *Hannibal* as portraying, through myth, the sublimation of fear. This critical thread, which navigates the field of science fiction, horror, and popular culture as a prism through which to look at the emotions that separate myth and science or technology is certainly eloquent to explore the functions and meanings of affect within mythology but, if there is one critical undercurrent that gives critical cohesion to the volume, that is certainly the analysis of modern rewritings –many times, of dramatic actualisations, whether in film or onstage– of ancient female tragedies.

It seems particularly noteworthy that in the volume *Myth and Emotions* the study of classical –particularly Greek– myth is overabundant. Most essays analyse modern and postmodern retellings of mythological stories from Ancient Greece, and even if it is true that tragic or legendary male heroes such as Oedipus or Odysseus are not forgotten –the modern reshaping of their stories is explored in chapters fourteen or eighteen, for example– the striking prominence of female tragic heroines is undeniable. The book is populated by modern Iphigenias, Medeas, Cassandras, Clytemnestras, Antigones, and Ariadnes, most of whom are translated to modern settings but kept on a dramatic (or cinematic) space, still performing tragic femininity to overcome tragedy itself, as explored by Andrade Boué; to illustrate the «emotional valence of myth», as argued by Burnett, to shape the contemporary traumas of immigration and exile, in De Toffoli's essay; to dramatize the horrors of the femicides in Mexico today, as examined by Stamatelou; to capture the pessimism of the mid-twentieth century, as explained by Šuman, or to rebel against the patriarchy, as Velasco Rengel describes. It could hardly pass as a coincidence, this profusion of female stories in a book that deals with emotions. It has been precisely the intellectual subordination of emotions over centuries of enlightened debate that has subordinated the feminine (Ahmed, p. 3) and, of course, as Ahmed recognizes, the identification of femaleness with emotionality –as opposed to maleness and rationality– is not innocuous, or casual, for, as she writes, «emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power» (p. 4).

Affect theory, or the cultural analysis of emotions to which the book under review brilliantly and prolifically contributes, not only reveals the politics contained in the traditional rhetoric of emotionality; it especially provides a critical tool to reconsider emotions as a cultural practice, a part of our culture, as shapers of culture, but also, as re-makers and transformers of culture. From this perspective, myth and emotion

are not only indissoluble, but also identifiable. Myth shapes, interprets and transforms culture. And the volume *Myth and Emotion* demonstrates such a claim in a way that truly enriches, firstly, the contemporary critical debate around affect and emotions and, secondly, and just as importantly, the present study of myth-criticism in a global, interdisciplinary and multicultural context. For these reasons, this book is indispensable in the contemporary panorama of Spanish and European research on myth, culture and affect.

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